

Plato on death and immortality

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Plato's dialogue, *Phaedo*, recounts how Socrates spent the last day of his life in prison after his trial, discussing with friends whether the soul survives death. Socrates' friends are unsure what happens to our souls when we die, and worried about what will happen to Socrates' soul after his imminent death by hemlock. By contrast, Socrates himself is confident that death is not the end and presents a series of arguments designed to convince and reassure his friends. Philosophers continue to debate the validity of those arguments, but the dialogue also raises wider questions about death and immortality. What kind of beliefs about life after death were current in ancient Greece at the time when the *Phaedo* was written, in the fourth century B.C.? What do Socrates and his friends mean when they talk about 'the soul'? What kind of life does Socrates think his soul is going to have after the death of his body? And finally, if we believe – like Socrates – that the soul survives death, what difference does that make to the way we live our lives now in the present? Anne Sheppard explores some possible responses.

Shades or souls?

In book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey* Odysseus goes to the edge of the underworld and meets the ghosts of the dead. They are pale shadows of their former selves, who have to drink the blood of sacrificed animals before they can speak to him. At the end of book 11, Minos is described as judging the dead, and Odysseus sees some particularly notorious wrongdoers such as Tantalus and Sisyphus suffering punishment. At the beginning of *Odyssey* 24 the ghosts of the suitors killed by Odysseus are compared to bats gibbering in a cave as they are led down to the underworld by Hermes.

By the fourth century B.C., other beliefs were competing with the views reflected in these Homeric episodes. The Pythagoreans believed in reincarnation and a fragment of the philosopher Philolaus, a contemporary of Socrates, describes the soul as 'yoked to the body as a punishment of some kind and ... buried in the body as in a tomb'. Simmias and Cebes, with whom Socrates is talking in the *Phaedo*, are explicitly described as Pythagoreans, who have studied with

take a good deal for granted: although they are not completely convinced that the soul survives death, they are predisposed to accept something like a Pythagorean view rather than the Homeric picture, and they share Socrates' assumptions about what kind of thing the soul is. It is worth looking a bit more closely at just what Socrates and his friends mean when they talk about 'the soul' (*psyche* in Greek).

What does *psyche* mean?

In classical Greek anything that is alive can be described as having a *psyche* and so Greek philosophers, including both Plato and Aristotle, talk naturally about not only human beings but also animals and even plants having *psychai* or 'souls'. We might think of the word 'soul' as one used in religious, rather than philosophical, contexts. Philosophers today discuss 'the mind-body problem' but they do not usually have much to say about the soul. Plato, on the other hand, makes no clear distinction between the soul and the mind. It is important for the arguments in the *Phaedo* and, as we shall see, for the kind of immortality Socrates is portrayed as

believing in, that thinking, particularly about subjects such as mathematics or philosophy, is an activity of the soul. Socrates and his friends also assume that our souls are what make us good or bad people; differences in individual personality are differences of soul. Like Philolaus they take it for granted that a person's soul is something distinct from his or her body. That is why it makes sense to ask what happens to the soul when the body dies.

Arguments for immortality

Socrates' first actual argument for the immortality of the soul presents life and death as a continuous cycle: just as sleep follows being awake and being awake follows sleep, so death follows life and life follows death. He then proceeds to argue that our souls existed before we were born, on the basis that some of our knowledge does not depend on experience in this life. Mathematical truths, for example, are what philosophers call 'necessarily true', i.e. we do not have to keep checking the evidence in order to be sure that $2+2=4$ or that the three angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees.

According to the theory accepted by the characters in the *Phaedo* we come to know truths of this kind by recollecting knowledge which our souls acquired before we were born – and this phenomenon of recollection is treated as showing that our souls existed before birth. Cebes points out that Socrates has yet to show that the soul exists after death as well as before birth. In response, Socrates first suggests that they should combine the argument for a continuous cycle of life and death with the argument from recollection and then goes on to claim that the soul is a similar kind of thing to the Platonic Forms or Ideas, universal qualities such as absolute beauty, absolute justice, or the perfect circle. The imperfect examples of beautiful things and just actions which we encounter in daily life as well as the imperfect circles we draw on paper or in the sand reflect the perfect Forms. These cannot be perceived by the senses but can be understood by the soul. When a soul that is well trained in thinking about such Forms

leaves the body it will pass into the intelligible realm in which the true beauty, true justice, and perfect circles exist.

Reincarnation

Understanding Platonic Forms is hard, and most souls will not attain a sufficient grasp of philosophy to achieve this kind of immortality. Socrates suggests that most souls will instead be reincarnated in other bodies and offers an account of such reincarnation in moral terms. The souls of those who overeat, get drunk, or commit sexual assault will be reincarnated as donkeys and similar animals, while the souls of the unjust, tyrannical, and violent will be reincarnated as wolves, hawks, and kites. Those who have lived virtuous lives but lack understanding of what they are doing and why will be reincarnated as social insects such as bees, wasps, and ants – or even as ordinary human beings again. Only the philosopher's soul will escape from the cycle of reincarnation into a world of eternal truths. The implication, of course, is that Socrates' soul will be able to escape in that way. What kind of life would such a soul live, outside the body? It would seem to be a life of eternal philosophical contemplation and understanding – not everyone's idea of Heaven!

Why does it matter?

In the dialogue, the discussion carries on. Simmias and Cebes are still not convinced that the soul survives death. They put some important objections to the arguments so far and Socrates responds with a further argument which claims that since the soul, the *psyche*, is a principle of life it is contradictory to envisage a 'dead soul'. He also offers a mythical account of the underworld which draws on Homeric, Pythagorean, and Orphic ideas and includes a description of punishment after death for wrongs committed in this life.

For Socrates, who is about to die, and for Simmias and Cebes, who are about to lose their teacher and friend, the question of what happens after death is an urgent one. For the reader not facing any immediate prospect of death, the question may seem more a matter of remote speculation. But Plato always emphasizes that philosophy affects the way we live our lives.

We do not need to take literally either the rather fanciful account of reincarnation offered in the middle of the dialogue or the myth told at the end, but both present us with a very clear message: a virtuous life is better than a wicked one, and a philosophical life, in which we strive to understand the principles which underlie our actions, is best of all. That is why right from the beginning of the dialogue Socrates talks of the philosopher 'practising death'. This does not mean commit-

ting suicide. It means making knowledge of the truth our aim while we are alive.

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